Where Are the Bodies?
A Transnational Examination of State Violence and Its Consequences

Introduction

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Abstract: This special issue of The Public Historian will examine what is a pressing, pervasive, traumatic, and very public contemporary issue in which history and historians are heavily involved in many countries around the globe. Authors will investigate a range of issues around the state involvement in death, including the role of the state as perpetrator and its responsibilities to the victims and their families; the process and significance of exhumation, of identification, and of repatriation; the status of refugees and displaced peoples who die when legally stateless and so without state protection; the differing transnational stances in tracing and punishing the perpetrators; the fraught issue of personal and official reparation; and the role and efficacy of international justice.

Key words: bodies, death, memory studies, ghosts, forensic archeology

The papers presented in this special issue of The Public Historian originated in the symposium, “Where Are the Bodies? A Transnational Examination of State Murder and its Consequences,” held at The University of Sydney on November 23, 2007. In the main, the bodies at the center of these essays were the prime movers in political change wrought from contestations over the way in which they had lost their lives. The presence of the bodies raised the equally contentious question of who would be held responsible for the deaths. In all the cases, in different places and with varying levels of violence, the nation state was implicated. And whether the collateral that resulted was...
in the form of complete cadavers easily tagged to their lived identities; or as fragmentary remains with slim likelihood of identification; or even when manifested as ghosts that haunted the spaces of the departed, dead bodies were the catalysts for a new understanding of the events that had compromised the living. Similarly, the public perception of them was politically charged, as the bodies travelled from a state of being “unnoticed” to that of a “troubling absence,” and finally emerging into visibility as a “significant omission.”

Overall, the essays are exemplars of the anthropologist Katherine Verdery’s claim that in “dead-body politics,” politicized corpses can be powerful symbols that yoke the past to the present and the future.

In the last decades there has been a veritable boom in memory studies. It has been fuelled by the conjunction of historical events and a growing interest in the phenomenon of memory itself. The end of the Cold War and the series of commemorations that ushered in the new millennium produced a flurry of writings that attempted to re-envision the history of the twentieth century. As always, new insights and reconfigured narratives forged changes in both vernacular and official interpretations of how the century had progressed. In turn, these triggered a revisiting and reiteration of private and collective remembrances whose fit was closer to the contours of the present and connected more seamlessly with the preoccupations of the new century.

Although rarely receiving the attention they deserved, bodies have been integral in the expansion of memory studies. After all, the body is both the

1. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory (London: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 115–16. The transformation also may travel in the opposite direction from a state of common knowledge to secret knowledge and then into silence, as in the example of the rape of German and Austrian women at the end of World War II, where the information about rape was repressed and eventually disassociated from the collective narratives about Liberation. See Timothy Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, “The Politics of War Memory.” In The Politics of Memory: Commemorating War, eds. Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper (London: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 19.


3. In a broad-ranging “analytic of memory” that lays out the factors that cause memory change in contemporary societies, Carol Gluck includes the importance of the “discourses of meta-memory” as demonstrated in the intense debates recently about the reliability and the functions of memory. See “Operations of Memory: ‘Comfort Women’ and the World.” In Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia, ed. Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Rana Mitter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 47–77.

4. The fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II and the memorialization of the losses from The Shoah and Hiroshima produced a great many public and private commemorations as well as a wave of individual and official narratives. The end of the Berlin Wall and the thaw in the Cold War melted pockets of “frozen memories,” again releasing a flood of private recollections which in turn spurred a recapitulation of vernacular and official narratives that had been anchored in Cold War events.

5. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan favor “collective remembrance” over “collective memory” because it separates the concept from generalizations about shared associations and recollections by large groups. See “Setting the Framework.” In War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century, eds. Winter and Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200), 8–9.

6. According to Kathleen Canning, the body remains a “largely unexplicated and under-theorised historical concept.” Feminists in the nature versus culture debate favored culture, with
repository of memory and the vehicle of its articulation. The actual corporeal entity, what Caroline Bynam graphically describes as the “flesh dress,” functions as a mnemonic for the changes in the life of the wearer. The physical markings on the body, laid down through the life passage, serve as powerful reminders of that life and are retained as traces in the bodily detritus of bone and teeth. Even when what is left is no more than a dismembered part with no discernible link to a previous existence, the very presence of bodily remains makes certain that at some time and in some place it was part of a living community. In a study of popular attitudes towards the embalmed Lenin, lying in state in the Kremlin mausoleum, Graeme Gill suggests that the salience of the symbolism of the human body arises from the fact that it taps into the “existential issues” that are universal among the living; that is “where we have come from and where are we going.”

A number of memory theorists delineate the distinction between vernacular and official memory. John Bodnar, in a study of public commemoration in the United States, argues that the form of public commemoration and the associated rituals and material culture are determined at the intersection of what he terms “official and vernacular cultures.” Agents of the former are part of the nation state, including government, educational institutions, and the military. Proponents of the latter come from special interest groups, families, veterans, and similar agents in civil society. The vernacular privileges personal experience while the official favors an “idealized reality” of patriotism and nation. For Bodnar, official culture always prevails, though activists and agents in the vernacular sphere may impinge upon the official and influence the content of the collective story of the nation’s past. The Sydney symposium papers offered a number of examples of political change and new narratives about it that occurred at the intersection of the official and the vernacular.

In this collection, Beth Gibbings relates the poignant circumstances of the 350 deaths that occurred when an Indonesian vessel, designated as SIEV X, the consequent focus on gender to the exclusion of interest in the sex or the corporeal reality of the body. See “The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History,” Gender & History 11, no. 3 (1999): 499–513. In an interesting juxtaposition, Lisa A. Kirschenbaum has shown that the starvation conditions of the Leningrad Siege extinguished all the visible sexual differences of male and female and what previously had been deeply ingrained distinctions between male and female work. See “‘The Alienated Body’: Gender Identity and the Memory of the Siege of Leningrad.” In Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe, eds. Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 220–34.

7. Caroline Bynum, adapting the idea from Margaret Atwood, has coined the term to emphasise the protean and discursive nature of the body, in “Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective,” Critical Inquiry, 22 (Autumn 1995): 2.


transporting asylum seekers, sank on the night of October 19, 2001 in international waters off northern Australia. Most of the passengers, predominantly women and children, perished. At that time, the Australian government had already turned its back on all asylum seekers despite their rights being guaranteed under United Nations protocol. The official response to the loss of the SIEV X was equally harsh: as the drowned were not Australian citizens, their fate was not a government responsibility. A small group of activists determined to make a memorial to mourn the dead. As no bodies were recovered, the monument comprised a series of symbolic bodies, represented by decorated poles, each of which stood for an individual who had been lost in the dark waters on that fateful night. The publicity surrounding the making of the memorial raised popular awareness of the SIEV X tragedy. As a consequence, more and more Australians spoke out to demand that the government acknowledge that the drowned asylum seekers on the SIEV X, risking life for a new future in Australia for themselves and their children, shared the same needs and aspirations as the people who were already settled in the country. The Labor government that succeeded the Liberals has abolished temporary protection visas, and the tenor of official discussion is more welcoming.

The exhumation of the bodies in Patio 29, a burial ground in Santiago, Chile, was the result of the persistence of relatives of the Chilean desaparecidos, determined to hold on to their own memories of the events surrounding the executions by government death squads during General Pinochet’s regime. The truth of the deaths, of which the opened graves could provide evidence, would challenge the official story that had been propounded by Pinochet’s political elite. Marivic Wyndham and Peter Read track the story of the bodies from Patio 29 and reveal the dispiriting reality that the rematerialization of the disappeared from Pinochet’s regime has not led to the righting of previous wrongs. Instead, the exhumations raised profound questions about the efficacy of official attempts to make reparation for Pinochet’s state terror and the integrity of the public officials charged with the task.

In Indonesia, the mass killings of people accused of being communists in 1965 were justified by the victorious Suharto regime as a necessity to save the nation from the instability of the Sukarno years. Adrian Vickers examines the polemic around the bodies in light of more accurate estimates of the numbers killed. He shows that in many of the regions and villages where the mass executions took place, the events were retained in popular memory in the form of the ghosts that appeared in the places where the deaths had occurred.

In the three examples, the asylum seekers lost when SIEV X went down, the disappeared at Patio 29, and those killed by Suharto’s military, the detail of the history had been lost through a process of “repressive erasure.” It was regained, though not always with the hoped-for outcome, either by the persistence of activists in the civil sphere who insisted on bringing the event.

into the open or by those relying on the authenticity of private memories anchored in vernacular culture with which to challenge the official narrative. In villages in Java, the memory of those executed was integrated into long-standing popular beliefs about the propensity for the dead to appear before the living in ghostly visitations. As a consequence, the memory of the communist dead became embedded in collective recollection and local narrative. Whether located in Australia, in post-Pinochet Chile, or in contemporary Indonesia, all these examples highlight that body politics is always deeply embedded in local conditions.

Who owns the body will play a large part in determining the body’s disposition and how the death is dealt with and remembered. In ontological terms, and indeed in common sense, bodies belong to the original wearer of the “flesh dress.” However, the historical reality of ownership is much more complex. In wartime, for example, military volunteers relinquish to the state the individual’s right of life and death. Within its jurisdiction, the state defends its ownership energetically, meting out harsh punishment for any infringements on proprietorship as when a soldier attempts to exercise a counter-right of possession by going AWOL. In dealing with dead soldiers, the distinct national styles of ownership are clearly apparent. Judith Keene examines the tradition of the mortuary services in finding and repatriating the American military dead and how it functioned and has recently played out in handling the dead and missing from the Korean War.

The use of the bodies of colonized native peoples as though they were no more than un-owned and unidentifiable artifacts of the human race to be measured and stored for future scientific use is perhaps the most egregious example of state violence against bodies. The Australian Aboriginal subjects that Michael Pickering analyzes were not volunteers and had given no permission to the anthropologists and state officials who took Aboriginal bodies and shipped them to museums and research institutions abroad. The recent repatriation to Australia of some sets of Aboriginal remains is the result of a shift in the official recognition that ownership of these bodies resides with the families and the clans from whose burial grounds they were stolen. The restitution and reparation for the damage done to Aboriginal communities and individual families, however, is a complex and difficult undertaking that entails not only the physical bodily recovery but also that of the history of the people and of the land of those who had been lost.

Forensic archaeologist Richard Wright describes the professional commitment and the personal stamina required to carry out forensic identifications of bodies in mass killings such as those in Bosnia and the Ukraine. Whether working in a humanitarian capacity to aid family members desperate to know where and how their loved ones died, or collecting evidence to be used in future state prosecution of the murderers, forensic recovery requires painstaking field work in which there is no assurance of a successful outcome.

The six essays that appear in this issue of the Public Historian cover sev-
eral important fields in memory and body politics. The authors identify the
detail of the local conditions and political context as well as pointing to the di-
rection of further research. Dead bodies are polysemic and therefore context,
significance, and meaning must be seamlessly connected.

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Three Allied Broadcasters on Axis Radio (Praeger, 2009), examines a British, an Australian,
and a Japanese American who were separately tried as traitors at the end of World War II.